UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1997/5
18 March 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Fifth session
7-25 April 1997

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21 AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Report of the Secretary-General

CONTENTS

	Paragraphs	Page
INTRODUCTION	1 - 4	2
I. ASSESSMENT OF IMPLEMENTATION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL	5 - 111	3
A. Developing strategies for sustainable development	5 - 11	3
B. Poverty, population, human settlements and health	12 - 24	4
C. International cooperation and trade	25 - 28	7
D. Changing production and consumption patterns	29 - 35	7
E. Natural resource management	36 - 80	8
F. Addressing the risks associated with wastes and hazardous materials	81 - 86	17
G. Role of major groups	87 - 92	18
H. Means of implementation	93 - 111	20
II. CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES AHEAD	112 - 117	24
III. NEXT STEPS	118 - 120	25

97-06812 (E) 270397

/...

INTRODUCTION

1. The present report provides an assessment of information contained in approximately 100 country profiles[1] which outline national progress in implementing Agenda 21 since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The analysis reflects the perspectives of the national Governments, on the basis of a common framework provided by the Secretariat, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 50/113, in which the Assembly decided to hold a special session to view and appraise the implementation of Agenda 21 and requested the Secretary-General to prepare for the consideration of the Commission on Sustainable Development at its fifth session country profiles providing a concise presentation of progress made and constraints encountered in implementing Agenda 21 at the national level, compiled on the basis of national information received and in close cooperation with the Governments concerned.

2. The structure of this report reflects the primary themes related to the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of Agenda 21. Within those themes, the country profiles are analysed, using a regional focus, grouped as follows: Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, the developed countries of Europe and North America, and countries with economies in transition. Where appropriate, other groupings may be used, particularly the differentiation between developed and developing countries. In such cases, countries are classified according to the World Economic and Social Survey 1996.[2] That national and regional perspective complements the global assessments of progress presented by other documents prepared for the special session.

3. In reading this report, some consideration should be given to the following limitations. First of all, the country profiles were biased towards reporting progress; hence, there may be less attention to obstacles and problems faced by countries than is warranted. Secondly, although 100 country profiles is a large number, it is still not necessarily representative of all countries. This is even truer in the case of regional assessments, where the distribution of country profiles among regions was uneven. Thirdly, it is inevitable that much of the richness and detail provided by the individual profiles is submerged. Within the scope of this paper, it is obviously not possible to represent progress for all reporting countries comprehensively or to reflect completely the diversity of countries found within regions. The experience of individual countries may well vary from the regional generalizations given for each theme.[3] For this reason, attention is also drawn to the individual country profiles which are being provided to the Commission at its fifth session in their entirety, in hard copy. In addition, in order to enhance transparency and encourage exchange of information and experience, the country profiles have been made available on the Internet (http://www.un.org/dpcsd/earthsummit).

4. The conclusion of the report provides a synopsis of challenges and priorities that require attention in order to build on the initial progress of implementing Agenda 21 at the national level. This information, together with the individual country profiles and other documentation prepared for the special session, should assist the United Nations, international organizations, and

Governments to focus and reinforce their future efforts towards the achievement of sustainable development.

I. ASSESSMENT OF IMPLEMENTATION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

A. Developing strategies for sustainable development

5. Above all, progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 requires political will at national and local levels, and nowhere has measurable progress been so visible over the past five years than in the structures and instruments that guide decision-making. This is true in all regions of the world and in countries at all levels of development.

6. There has been considerable effort at the country level to develop strategies aimed at integrating social, economic, and environmental priorities in the post-UNCED period. Much of this strategy development has been accomplished through the involvement of major stakeholders. Many Governments have established broad-based national councils or commissions to oversee the development and implementation of strategies. Some of those structures are more central to decision-making than others. Some appear to have the power to enforce; others, to influence; and still others, only to suggest. Nonetheless, in all cases, it would seem that the existence of a coordinating mechanism has set into play a process of dialogue, awareness and broad participation that should have an impact on implementation of Agenda 21 over the medium- and long-term, if not immediately.

7. There is little consistency in the types of strategies that have been established, reflecting the great diversity in national priorities and circumstances. A few countries have produced fully integrated sustainable development strategies. Others, with experience in state planning, have broadened national multi-year economic development plans to incorporate social and environmental considerations. Other models include the creation of conservation strategies or sector plans related to, for example, health, biodiversity, or desertification. The completion of environmental plans, often including socio-economic considerations, currently represents the more common approach to integration. There is, in addition, a pivotal movement towards the development of integrated plans and strategies in some major sectoral areas, particularly in the areas of forests, desertification and drought, atmosphere and biodiversity. At the same time, there are other areas, such as coastal zone management, freshwater, health and land management, where more traditional sectoral approaches continue to prevail.

8. The geographical scope of strategy development also varies. In addition to national strategies, many countries are contributing to regional strategies for sustainable development, such as the Mediterranean Action Plan and the Asia and Pacific Regional Action Programme for Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development. Finally, UNCED has stimulated the development of local Agenda 21 action plans in over 2,000 local communities worldwide. Moreover, even where formalistic local Agendas 21 do not exist, the country profiles give evidence of an increasing devolution of authority to local communities to take action for sustainable development.

9. Almost every country has established legislation or regulation that requires environmental impact assessments, especially at the project and programme level, but increasingly at the level of policy-making as well. In approximately two thirds of the countries, major reviews have been undertaken of the legislation relevant to sustainable development. This includes a review both of what did and did not exist prior to UNCED, with the objective of amending or drafting laws more consistent with Agenda 21 and, in some cases, of making general legislation more specific, including the establishment of specific targets. In no subregion have these reviews been deeper and more pervasive than among the countries with economies in transition, where overall restructuring has provided an opportunity to recast both structure and process in conformity with Agenda 21.

10. Very few countries appear to be developing systems for "green accounting". However, there is extensive use of eco-labelling and application of the polluter-pays principle in the developed countries and, to a significant extent, in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and of Asia and the Pacific. Eco-auditing as a voluntary instrument of the private sector is also growing, particularly in developed countries.

11. In this initial period after UNCED, countries have been concentrating on putting in place strategies, laws and regulations that relate to sustainable development. Often this has involved a broadening of existing national planning and a movement from centralized decision-making to broad participation. At the same time, several developing countries have difficulties with financing and supporting programmes and projects. Few countries are well advanced with the implementation of integrated strategies, and it is too early to expect strategy evaluation and assessments.

B. Poverty, population, human settlements and health

12. Poverty, population, health and human settlements are among the major social issues addressed by Agenda 21. They are closely interlinked and have significant economic, environmental and institutional implications. In these four areas, and according to the country profiles, human health is the area where the most progress has been achieved; poverty, the least.

13. For most countries, and particularly for most developing countries, eradication of poverty is given greatest priority, but few countries have the resources effectively to tackle such a pervasive issue over the short term. As recommended by the World Social Summit, many have initiated or reinforced strategies to combat poverty since UNCED by means of presidential commissions and national task forces or within national socio-economic plans. Implementation is usually directed towards both increasing economic opportunity - for example, through land reform and land rehabilitation, strengthening the agricultural sector, education and training, job creation, and access to seed capital - and towards providing a social safety net, through the provision of shelter and support to community groups and broad participation in decision-making. However, it is too early to see widespread positive results. A few countries have made significant progress, but overall declines in poverty levels are not evident.

14. Poverty does not appear to be a significant national issue in developed countries; unemployment and its economic and social costs, however, are. This is even truer in countries with economies in transition, where both unemployment rates and the cost of living have risen consistently since 1990.

15. In the area of demographics, it is clear that the 1994 United Nations Conference on Population and Development has had a positive influence on policies and planning in almost all countries. Family planning, the active involvement of women in decision-making and regional settlement strategies are common activities in this area. Most countries that have intended to decrease birth rates have succeeded to some extent. Nonetheless, very few countries appear completely satisfied with the results of their population policies and programme interventions.

16. Progress in developing countries has been mixed. The most success in reducing the rate of population growth has been achieved in a few Asian and Latin American countries, as a result of institutional development, research and information dissemination. Developed countries have generally stabilized their rate of population growth rate, and in countries with economies in transition, there is a concern that populations are declining below desirable ranges.

17. All countries have undergone urbanization, and the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul helped to define that issue and crystallize action in the area of human settlements in all regions. The tradition of strong involvement by local government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector in the development of settlements is reinforced by many country profiles. Financial constraints are apparent in all regions, inhibiting the achievement of sustainable communities with adequate housing, a desirable environment, and a satisfactory quality of life. A few countries in all regions are attempting to strengthen rural and village settlements in order to stem urban migration and provide more balanced national development.

18. African countries are at an early stage of urbanization, with relatively low urban proportions but high rates of urban population growth, leading to severe strains on urban areas and resulting in environmental degradation and urban sprawl. Priority is being given to the provision of housing, infrastructure - particularly improved sanitation - and the protection of open spaces.

19. Human settlement patterns are very diverse in the countries of Asia and the Pacific. A few are highly urbanized (for example, Singapore and Australia); others have recently experienced high rates of urbanization (for example, the Republic of Korea); while others are essentially rural in character (for example, Nepal). Consequently, there is considerable diversity in settlement priorities. Many countries are focusing on the provision of adequate housing and of water and sewer infrastructure. Others are concentrating on the environmental interface, either through the provision of green space, disaster prevention, or the encouragement of public and non-vehicular transport.

20. Europe and North America have a longer history of urbanization, with most people residing in an urban setting. The rate of growth of urban populations has been relatively low (less than 1 per cent) over the past five years.

Emphasis is shifting to the development of sustainable cities where urban form and the environment are in closer harmony through the economical use of materials and space, the use of land for nature conservation and open space, support to public transportation systems, disincentives for vehicular traffic, noise abatement, and energy-efficient housing. This implies a high degree of cooperation among various national agencies and local authorities.

21. Latin American and Caribbean countries also have an urban tradition, with the proportion of urban population ranging from 47 per cent to 93 per cent. The rates of urban population growth tend to be slightly higher than in Europe but have begun to decline over the past five years. This may be due to a number of factors, but one which emerges from the country profiles is the migration of people to smaller towns and cities, making demands for new and improved infrastructure in additional areas dispersed throughout the countries. Several countries report some progress in the recent development of national settlement strategies focused on new and renovated housing and urban infrastructure, particularly water and sanitation systems. More efficient and less polluting transportation systems were also common themes in several Latin American countries.

22. Urban systems are comparatively well developed in the countries with economies in transition, but former policies tended to favour urbanization at the expense of the environment, efficient resource use, and rural development. Cities face the task of urban restructuring, pollution control, and environmental rehabilitation under severe fiscal constraints.

23. The majority of countries in all regions, with the exception of countries with economies in transition, report improvements in basic health indicators, especially life expectancy and infant mortality. Child mortality rates (i.e., of children under the age of five years), however, have increased in some regions, a consequence, presumably, of both poverty and armed conflict. Moreover, there appears to be movement towards integrated health policies; countries speak of health policies in combination with policies not only, for example, for poverty, education and human settlements but also, for example, for freshwater and waste disposal. The link between health and the environment has been established in many countries. Overall, the need for multi-agency strategy development, integrated programmes, and partnerships with major groups, including women, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, is stressed.

24. A number of countries have established policies and targets based on the "Health for All" strategy of the World Health Organization and have attained successful results. The least developed countries, however, are still struggling to achieve improvements. Several countries with economies in transition have experienced increases in infant mortality in the 1990s and stable or deteriorating rates of maternal mortality. This is the only region where life expectancy is not increasing in all countries. Environmental degradation is particularly chronic and has resulted in serious health problems, including increases in child morbidity.

C. International cooperation and trade

25. There is general support for further liberalization and expansion of world trade and the establishment of a common institutional framework under the World Trade Organization. Regional trade agreements and bilateral cooperation are important in all areas. The need to incorporate environmental considerations in activities promoted through international cooperation is raised by many countries. The issues of trade/environment linkages, debt reduction, and access to markets for developing countries require continued concerted action.

26. In Africa, reporting countries indicate that they are restructuring their economies to encourage trade, fiscal reform, and a stronger private sector. International cooperation has allowed these policies to be implemented, but countries still face debt problems and difficult external trading conditions. A number of countries are benefiting from subregional cooperation, for example, through the Southern African Development Community.

27. The countries of Asia and the Pacific are taking action to improve trade through structural adjustments, especially the removal or lowering of tariff and non-tariff barriers. Countries are trying to become more competitive and efficient. Several are contributing to environment/trade deliberations within international organizations but stress the need for improved clarity on environment/trade interactions. Others are working internationally to promote better and improved trading conditions and prices for commodities. In the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, the experience with trade liberalization is very mixed, ranging from participation in international and regional trade agreements to restricted access to world markets.

28. Developed countries are paying increasing attention to the need to ensure that environment and trade are mutually supportive. Many countries are trying to improve market access and reduce debt loads for developing countries. International cooperation is very important for economic restructuring within countries with economies in transition. New Pan-European partnerships are replacing the former subregional markets, but the liberalization of trade has yet to benefit the whole region.

D. Changing production and consumption patterns

29. Unsustainable consumption and production patterns are central to many environmental and development issues. Consumption of energy and natural resources tends to be very high in developed countries, while much of the world has difficulty meeting basic needs related to food, shelter, health, and education.

30. Since the initial impetus at UNCED, consumption and production issues have clearly been placed on the policy-making agenda of many countries. National debates have focused attention on the key tools to increase efficiency and reduce waste, including public awareness, economic instruments and pricing, and technology transfer. The mix of financial, social, and environmental benefits has attracted the attention of a wide range of stakeholders representing Governments, business, non-governmental organizations, and the academic

community. Non-governmental organizations, for example, are playing a significant role in strategy development, raising consumer awareness, and implementing recycling programmes.

31. Most countries have initiated some action to internalize costs and change consumer behaviour. However, concrete gains in reducing consumption are not yet evident. Energy consumption per capita, for example, continues to rise in the vast majority of countries, except in the region with economies in transition, due to their recent recession. Clearly, national efforts must continue over the longer term before significant gains can be realized.

32. Present consumption in Africa is largely to meet basic needs, but steps are being taken in individual countries to promote reduced energy consumption, improve nutrition, and rationalize resource use. More sustainable consumption patterns are being encouraged in the Asia and Pacific region, although the level of consumption per capita is not high in most of the developing countries there. Increased economic activity is accompanied by increased energy use almost everywhere. At the same time, efforts are being made for energy efficiency improvements. Many countries have introduced eco-labelling schemes.

33. Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have held multi-stakeholder national debates on consumption and production patterns, often accompanied by education campaigns for consumers. Waste reduction and recycling initiatives are prevalent, and several countries in the region are studying energy-efficiency measures for transport and housing. The most attention, however, is directed towards poverty assistance and social programmes.

34. Developed countries are taking action based on economic and voluntary instruments to change consumption and production patterns. The focus is primarily on producers, transportation, and households, to increase energy efficiency and to reduce waste. National debates have frequently led to new legislation, and eco-labelling is almost universal. Several countries have established targets related to packaging, recycling, waste reduction, and energy efficiency.

35. In the region with economies in transition, recent changes in production and consumption patterns have been primarily determined by economic recession and the transition to a market economy. The general consumption of goods has declined in most countries. Governments have introduced programmes aimed at reducing energy and water consumption, encouraging waste reduction and recycling, and introducing environmentally friendly technologies. Where eco-labelling programmes exist, they have influenced consumer purchases.

E. Natural resource management

36. Natural resource management is the largest component of Agenda 21, covering issues related to water, land, the atmosphere, biodiversity, and waste. Many of the issues have general relevance for all countries, while others apply to particular regions or countries. Freshwater resources, biodiversity, the atmosphere and sustainable agriculture are universally significant. Forests are significant in all regions and in the majority of countries. Management issues

that relate to coastal and ocean resources, mountain ecosystems and deserts are more country-specific but nonetheless span all continents. In a number of countries, and particularly with respect to coastal areas and mountains, the impact of natural disasters on sustainable development is an important issue.

37. In mountain areas, there is increased recognition of the importance of conservation, social development, and disaster prevention, although little attention appears yet to be given to sustainable tourism. For biodiversity, forests, and oceans, it is too early to see widespread results. Significant institutional development in these areas and increases in the amount of protected terrestrial and marine areas have occurred, but there is little evidence of countries adopting an integrated approach. Some progress on the development of programmes to combat drought and desertification is evident in Africa, although there is still a long way to go. Almost no information was available on the integration of land management except in developed countries. In the area of atmospheric protection, emissions in most countries are increasing. Generally, developed countries have reduced the consumption of ozone-depleting substances and emissions of SO_x and $NO11_x$, but more vigilance will be required for CO_2 emissions if targets are to be met.

38. Biodiversity and agricultural sustainability emerged from the country profiles as among the most significant resource management issues facing countries. Freshwater resources (especially in Africa and Asia and the Pacific), desertification (especially in Africa), and deforestation (especially in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean) were also high priorities.

1. Atmosphere

39. Pollution from transportation remains a major problem in most urban areas. CO_2 emissions, which continue to increase, are relevant for all countries, but special concern was expressed by small island developing States, in view of their greater potential vulnerability to rising sea levels. This issue is closely related to many Agenda 21 chapters, including consumption patterns, human health, technology transfer, land and marine resources, desertification, and deforestation.

40. Less action in this area was reported by African countries than countries in other regions. Nonetheless, there are efforts being made in Africa to develop strategies for the protection of the atmosphere and to conduct studies on energy substitution, air pollution, and the impact of climate change and adaptation to it. The most common concerns were related to pollution from transportation and the terrestrial and marine impacts of climate change.

41. In Asia and the Pacific, emphasis is placed on increasing energy efficiency and tackling air pollution, particularly in countries with considerable industry and increasing traffic. Countries are taking action by setting emission and air quality standards; encouraging cleaner fuel use, more efficient vehicles, and mass transport; promoting cleaner and more efficient production processes; and favouring renewable or alternative energy sources. Some countries have taken direct action to phase out ozone-depleting substances. A few States, including

Thailand and New Zealand, are taking measures to increase or protect their forest sink capacity.

42. In the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, Governments are giving high priority to the rehabilitation and modernization of power systems and to the development of new and renewable energy sources. Clean fuel is being promoted in several countries, and environmental impact assessments are a common requirement for energy production and transportation systems. Nearly half the countries have established targets to phase out ozone-depleting substances.

43. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, a full range of measures is being employed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve energy efficiency, including the establishment of targets for phasing out ozone-depleting substances and reductions in emissions. According to the country profiles, significant progress has been made with respect to emissions of SO_x and NO_x, but in several countries additional measures will be needed to reach CO_2 emission targets. Voluntary agreements, economic instruments, building construction codes, alternative energy sources and new vehicle standards are frequently used to improve energy efficiency. Technical capacity and the involvement of major groups are at a high level.

44. The countries with economies in transition are beginning to tackle their serious air pollution problems, caused primarily by thermal power stations and heavy industry. A universal reduction in emission levels and the consumption of ozone-depleting substances has resulted largely because of economic recession. Initiatives are being developed and implemented. For example, some of the countries in the region have established energy taxes. Adequate pollution control and energy efficiency are likely to be achieved only in the longer term, however.

45. Many countries in all regions expressed the need for regional and subregional agreements to control problems of transboundary air pollution. It was also clear that, while emissions caused by transportation are being given some attention almost everywhere, concrete action is largely lacking.

2. Land and ecosystems

(a) Integrated land management

46. A holistic approach to land resources is intrinsic to the achievement of sustainable development and should provide an umbrella for discussions in more specific land and land-related planning and management. However, progress in this area appears to be below average, particularly in view of its ubiquitous relevance.

47. In Africa, a few countries are making progress in strengthening scientific knowledge and information systems on land resources as a prelude to integrated planning. Implementation is limited, however, by the lack of sufficient post-UNCED funding. With few exceptions, neither in Latin America and the Caribbean nor in Asia and the Pacific is significant concrete action reported in integrated land management. Note is taken in both regions of the need to

address issues of zoning and the wanton spread of peri-urban areas. In the small island developing States, integrated land management is very much linked to coastal zone management. Serious land conflicts and land degradation are common. Almost everywhere, emphasis is placed on the role of local governments in this area.

48. Integrated land-use planning processes are better established in many developed countries. A hierarchical system provides the national policy and legislative framework, with land-use planning decentralized to the local or regional level. Programme priorities include the protection of special or sensitive lands, land rehabilitation, and the sustainable accommodation of increasing land demands.

49. In countries with economies in transition, the basis for a modern land planning and management system is currently under development. Countries are proceeding to establish land registry and planning systems; rehabilitate lands degraded by mining, agriculture, and acidification; and manage soil, forests, and protected areas.

(b) Deserts and drought

50. Desertification and drought are closely related to poverty, food security, and land degradation, particularly in Africa. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification[4] has stimulated an early national response, especially the preparation of action plans, but much remains to be done. Solid information, especially on trends, is generally lacking, and there is evidence of concrete results in only a few countries. Certainly, from the evidence of the country profiles, no country with serious land degradation has yet managed to control it. Lack of trained staff (especially at the field level) and inadequate information, monitoring networks, and funding represent the major constraints.

51. The response in the country profiles illustrates the widespread, high-priority nature of this issue for Africa. Desertification is exacerbated by fuel-wood collection, overgrazing, and poor land-use practices. The majority of countries have moved quickly to ratify the Convention and prepare action plans. Some implementation has occurred in most countries, especially in the areas of resource development and conservation, awareness-raising, domestic energy supply, alternative job opportunities, and use of indigenous knowledge.

52. In Asia and the Pacific, the management of dryland areas is an important issue, affecting specific areas in a limited number of countries. Drought and land degradation stemming from an uncertain climate, overgrazing, and poor agricultural practices are more typical than actual desertification. Action taken is both regionally and nationally focused and directed at the preparation of action plans for combating desertification, drought forecasting and aversion, rehabilitation of overgrazed and eroded areas, sand dune stabilization, afforestation and water resources development.

53. Desertification and drought are concerns also for several Latin American and Caribbean countries, as they relate particularly to soil erosion, fuel-wood collection and overgrazing. The majority of reporting countries have or are

preparing desertification action plans, with implementation to date focusing on early warning programmes, disaster preparation, reforestation, soil conservation, and awareness-raising.

54. In the countries with economies in transition, drought has had adverse consequences on agricultural production. Within other parts of Europe, desertification appears to be a problem largely for the area around the Mediterranean, and, in North America, in the central plains and along the west coast, where soil conservation programmes and rural economic diversification are particularly relevant. Many countries of these regions emphasize their support for the Convention and their provision of bilateral aid for its implementation.

(c) Mountains

55. Mountains are fragile environments which support various intensities of human settlement and land use. Sustainable development in mountains is based on an integrated strategy of disaster prevention, conservation and protection, appropriate land-use practices, and social development for isolated populations. As a consequence, reporting countries also discussed mountain development under other chapter headings, especially in reporting progress in land management, agriculture, and forests.

56. In Africa, sustainable mountain development is a high priority for only a few countries, but several African countries have taken action to protect biodiversity, improve agricultural land-use practices, and manage water resources in mountainous areas. The absence of surveys and plans is a major constraint. In Asia and the Pacific, a similar situation exists, with the response focusing on strategy development, catchment protection, eco-tourism, and forest conservation.

57. All reporting countries in Latin America recognize sustainable mountain development as a significant priority. The high potential for natural disasters, soil erosion, and forest damage is being actively addressed by watershed development plans focusing on sustainable agriculture and social programmes. Conservation achieved by "debt for nature swaps" is important.

58. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, countries are pursuing mountain resource strategies that try to balance the use of mountains for parks, ecosystem conservation, forestry, grazing, and tourism. In Alpine countries, land-use pressure, particularly from tourism, is being met with controls to protect the sensitive environment, and countries effectively cooperate under the Alpine Protection Convention.

(d) Agriculture and rural development

59. Agriculture contributes to the economic and social fabric of most countries, despite the widespread decline in agricultural land per capita. In developing countries, emphasis is largely on food security and increasing productivity. The economic role of agriculture has declined in relative terms in developed countries but remains significant. Progress is evident in all regions, although the blending of the sustainable development goals of increased agricultural production and environmental protection is not always easy for

countries to achieve. There is a pervasive awareness of the need to reduce chemical inputs to the soil and to adopt integrated pest management, and in some countries, the use of fertilizers has been significantly reduced. However, there is still more evidence of policies in this area than of actual implementation.

60. Recent initiatives in Africa have generally been related to land rehabilitation, the use of improved plant and animal stock, and water development. Slight increases in both agricultural area and fertilizer use are common within the region. In the face of population growth, weak prices for export crops and land degradation, the challenge of meeting sustainability objectives is formidable. Typically in Latin America and the Caribbean, the area of agricultural land has recently increased, and programme activities focus on rural development, land-tenure reform, and food security. Strengthened communication between Governments, farmers, and rural communities is also apparent.

61. In the majority of the developing countries of Asia and the Pacific, agriculture is a very significant economic sector. Increasing efficiency and productivity in a sustainable manner is a common focus, and more judicious use of pesticides and fertilizers, soil and water conservation, and animal waste recycling are some of the techniques being promoted to protect the environment. Agricultural research has contributed to meeting Agenda 21 objectives in several countries.

62. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, legislation and policy are generally consistent with sustainability requirements and focus on improving agricultural productivity in a sustainable manner in order to reduce the impact on the environment caused by production, to protect the healthy rural landscape, and to preserve the preconditions for production in the long run. The use of production methods is often regulated. The link between water protection and sustainable agriculture is clearly recognized. This is generally achieved through close collaboration between agriculture and environment ministries, farmers, and local communities. Substantial progress has been made with the adoption of good land-use practices, reduced reliance on fertilizers and pesticides, livestock pollution control, and the introduction of "ecological" farming.

63. In countries with economies in transition, a fundamental change from large-scale intensive farming systems to private land holdings is under way. In many countries of this region, the integrity of the soil has been compromised, but recent progress has been made with land reclamation, reduction of pesticide and fertilizer use, and improved food safety.

(e) Forests

64. Sustainable forest management is significant at the national level in all regions. Forest degradation, conservation, multi-use, and greater community involvement in decision-making are widespread issues. The acceptance of a set of principles at UNCED for the sustainable development of forests has had a catalytic influence on international collaboration and assistance. There is substantial reporting on this issue by virtually all countries, and it is clear

that the perception of forest management and a number of actions stemming from that perception have changed dramatically since 1992. At the regional level, much has been achieved in developing criteria and indicators for sustainable forestry.

65. Deforestation in Africa is generally the result of fuel-wood collection, conversion to agricultural land, charcoal-burning, and logging. The majority of countries would like to expand their efforts to address the deforestation issue through improved inventories and management. A few countries have increased forestry staff, but adequate staff complements, especially at the field level, remain a common constraint. In this region, scattered progress is evident in forest management and conservation, improved fire protection, industry efficiency, and increased reforestation rates. Despite general deforestation, a few countries have been able to increase their forest area.

66. In Asia and the Pacific, forests are a very important socio-economic resource. There is a widespread increase in forest conservation efforts, although forest losses and degradation remain severe in a few countries. Improved conservation is being achieved through better legislation and policy, improved monitoring and assessment, forest management agreements and plans, forestry codes of practice, and afforestation and protection. Special programmes to increase local community participation and benefits are common. Many countries have adopted the UNCED Forest Principles and are contributing to follow-up initiatives.

67. Combating deforestation is a high priority issue in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most countries have strengthened their forestry programmes with recent management plans, improved forestry extension services, and both forestry staff and reforestation programmes. A positive reforestation-to-deforestation rate, or a balance between use and protection, has been achieved in a few countries of the region.

68. Forest degradation is a serious problem in the developed countries of Europe and North America, and most countries report that they are moving towards sustainability and participatory decision-making. Forest area (primarily afforestation of agricultural land) and production are increasing in the majority of countries. Denmark, for example, has a target to double its woodland area within one tree generation. An increasing number of countries require that their timber imports originate from sustainably managed forests.

69. The countries with economies in transition are characterized by increasing forest area but lower production. The major problem is the degraded quality of the forest resources, caused primarily by industrial emissions. Countries are responding with legislative, policy, and programme initiatives, but fiscal constraints are severe.

3. Freshwater resources

70. Countries are aware of the key role that is played by freshwater resources for future economic and social development. There is considerable activity to develop national freshwater strategies, basin plans, and demand studies.

However, knowledge of water resources, especially groundwater, appears to be a limiting constraint; and sustainability, including integrated and efficient use, and dependable water quality, have not generally been attained. Insufficient attention appears to be given to the link between water and sanitation and to water and pollution more generally. Overall, there appears to be a fragmentation of responsibilities at the ministerial level which makes integrated water management extremely difficult.

71. In Africa, policy-setting focuses on water assessment, integrated watershed management and development, water supply and sanitation, agricultural development, and water protection. Several countries have recently established transboundary water commissions, and economic instruments are being used to encourage conservation in some countries. Problems occur in a number of countries in Asia and the Pacific from high water demand, pollution, and water leakage. In order to improve water conservation and its sustainable use, countries are developing national plans and strategies; establishing guidelines and standards; and planning major structural projects. To a large extent, however, integrated management, conservation, and sustainable use have only been achieved in the developed countries of the region. In a few countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, progress has been achieved with the development of national water studies and water use guidelines, and the implementation of improved water supply systems. However, residual problems relate to domestic, industrial, and agricultural pollution and their adverse effects on water quality. There is also concern over issues of equitable access to water systems, whether provided by public or private services.

72. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, water supply and wastewater treatment systems are usually satisfactory, and countries are generally moving towards integrated, sustainable use, relying, for example, on user charges, integrated basin management (including transboundary watersheds), and the establishment of protection zones. Agricultural pollution of surface water and groundwater remains the most serious sustainability question. The majority of the countries with economies in transition, assisted by international investment, are making progress controlling water pollution through wastewater treatment. Water consumption levels have generally dropped, primarily due to lower economic activity. Countries are trying to satisfy the obligations of transboundary water agreements.

4. Oceans, seas, and coastal areas

73. Countries are cooperating at the international and regional levels to protect ocean and coastal resources and improve their sustainable use. This includes the ratification of international conventions and regional sea agreements. Nevertheless, commercial fish stocks continue to decline in most regions. Governments have widely endorsed the precautionary principle for coastal areas, and they have achieved higher levels of sewage treatment. However, resource conflicts and degradation continue, as a result of higher coastal populations and development pressure.

74. In Africa, there is activity to prepare ocean or coastal management plans; at the same time, coastal erosion and pollution, urban development, and the lack

of coordination mitigate against substantial progress. In Asia and the Pacific, regional agencies play an important role in facilitating integrated planning. Individual countries are implementing coastal management plans, protecting marine areas, and improving fisheries management. A few countries are taking steps to protect or replant mangrove areas. Nevertheless, oil spills, over-fishing, pollution, and a potential rise in sea level in general are major problems for many countries. Small island developing States face many of these same issues and are concentrating significant attention on strategies for sustainable tourism.

75. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean generally have national ocean and integrated coastal management plans. Fish catch is increasing in the region, but most countries find it difficult to comply with international conventions. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, the level of integrated management, based on adequate surveillance and monitoring, is usually satisfactory. Progress is being achieved with wastewater treatment, coastal discharge, and reductions of phosphate and nitrate releases. In the countries with economies in transition, the major concern appears to be declining fish catches.

5. Biodiversity and biotechnology

76. The national response to the Biodiversity Convention is high in all regions, although it is too early to expect substantial results. It is clearly very difficult for many countries to rationalize biodiversity needs with more immediate development priorities; consequently, ecosystems continue to degrade at a serious rate. Losses are primarily due to habitat destruction and over-exploitation of species, with pollution and the introduction of exotic species as secondary causes. The key factors for improved response include closer cooperation between governmental agencies, the international community, and non-governmental organizations; better harmonization between resource use and protection; and greater financial commitment. There is a relatively low level of reporting for biotechnology. Overall, few countries have yet been able to achieve a balance between encouraging research and development, on the one hand, and safeguarding public concerns over potential adverse health and environmental effects, on the other.

77. In Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, legislation is being improved and national assessments and strategies developed. Several countries are strengthening protected areas and establishing gene banks, especially in relation to forest areas. A number of countries are working effectively with their university and research institutions on biodiversity research. There is growing concern about the impact of intellectual property rights on biodiversity and access to and transfer of related technology. In Asia and the Pacific, there is widespread concern over the serious threats to the integrity of the region's rich biodiversity. Countries are completing strategies and baseline studies, protecting terrestrial and marine areas, protecting and breeding endangered species, and conserving genetic resources. Some countries are attempting to protect a network of areas representative of their ecosystem diversity. In others, advisory councils and public awareness campaigns have been effective mobilizing forces.

78. There is a long tradition of in-situ and ex-situ conservation of species and protected areas in the developed countries of Europe and North America. The majority of countries have recently developed biodiversity strategies, usually with widespread stakeholder involvement. The integration of biodiversity into resource-sector strategies and management plans, especially forestry, is receiving considerable attention. In most of the countries with economies in transition, biodiversity protection requires a significant long-term investment in the renewal of land and land-related resources. The process began with legislative and strategy development, monitoring, and improvements to systems in protected areas.

79. In Africa, there is relatively little work being done in biotechnology except in the area of agriculture. Most of the biotechnology projects reported in the country profiles of Latin America and the Caribbean are also focused on agriculture. In the region of Asia and the Pacific biotechnology research, development, and application appear to be concentrated in only a few countries and are primarily directed towards agricultural, health, and environmental applications. Guidelines or legislation for biosafety are available or under development in most of the countries with biotechnology programmes. Some countries rely on a broad spectrum of stakeholder involvement, while others limit participation to research, university, and industry groups. The majority take account of the traditional methods and knowledge of indigenous peoples.

80. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, the development of biotechnology by government and the private sector is widely regulated, for safety reasons. Legislation, commissions and advisory bodies, risk assessment, and information exchange are the most frequently listed tools. Considerable research capability exists in many countries, with projects most frequently related to agriculture and waste management.

F. Addressing the risks associated with wastes and hazardous materials

81. The management of solid waste and sewage is closely related to the management of toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes and radioactive waste. This is an area where progress in the past five years is palpable, if not necessarily measurable. Almost every country has recognized the importance of dealing with wastes and hazardous materials, and most of them have programmes in the planning stage, if not actually already under way. Constraints are generally related to issues of urban and integrated land planning and costs. However, particularly in the case of hazardous wastes, the appropriate technologies for storage may simply not yet be available.

82. There is considerable public interest in these issues because of the implications to human health and the environment. Governments, business, and non-governmental organizations are trying to shift to preventive strategies that emphasize waste minimization, cleaner production processes, and coordinated chemical assessments. The search for safe management and storage dominates the responses on radioactive waste. Nevertheless, domestic and industrial waste production continues to increase in both absolute and per capita terms in all

regions. In addition, developing countries still face the expensive task of putting modern waste management collection and treatment facilities in place.

83. Overall, the technical capacity to manage waste in the African countries is low, but there is an indication in some countries of an effort to control the use of agricultural chemicals and develop information systems for hazardous waste. In addition, individual municipalities in a few countries have conducted solid waste and sewage treatment pilot projects and are encouraging recycling.

84. In Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean, the response is focusing on new waste management systems. Handling guidelines, better inventories, and improved treatment are typical preventive strategies for the management of hazardous waste; reduction strategies and enhanced treatment are used for solid wastes, with reduction targets established in some countries. In the case of toxic chemicals, improved legislation, increased risk assessment, control of the use of agricultural chemicals, and voluntary industry programmes are cited.

85. Developed countries use economic instruments in their approach to solid waste management. Many developing countries, however, lack sufficient institutional and technical capacity and the resources adequately to assess risk, make substantial progress on collection and treatment, and establish comprehensive waste management systems. In several countries, for example, the majority of solid waste is deposited in sanitary landfills, with considerable amounts indiscriminately dumped in and around urban areas. In addition, adequate sewage treatment is lacking in many developing countries.

86. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, it is generally accepted that the producers of waste, whether communities or industries, must bear the full responsibility for ensuring public safety. The overall programme emphasis is prevention through the use of replacement technologies and substances, waste minimization, reuse, and recycling. A few countries report downward trends in the amount of solid waste generated. Hazardous, radioactive, solid and sewage waste management are priority areas for the countries with economies in transition. The backlog of hazardous wastes represents a critical danger to human and environmental health. National needs are generally known, but progress with implementation has been severely hampered by limited institutional and technical capacity, lack of fiscal resources, and outdated plants and equipment. However, some progress is being made, for example, with waste management programmes that include treatment of hazardous waste, packaging legislation and economic incentives employed to minimize waste. Some countries - for instance, Finland - have adopted new waste legislation following the international developments in this field.

G. Role of major groups

87. At UNCED it was generally agreed that the achievement of sustainable development required active participation and decision-making by all segments of society. This partnership approach, emphasizing transparency and shared accountability, has been widely accepted in principle. For some countries, it has been relatively easy to accommodate meaningful group involvement. For

others, it has meant a radical change from traditional centralized decision-making, and the process of change has been less rapid.

88. Nevertheless, the role of major groups in the achievement of sustainable development has increased in all regions. This contribution can be recognized at the community level through local Agenda 21 initiatives; nationally by the advice provided on action plans and strategies; and globally through participation in international forums. Governments are working more closely with all groups on sustainable development problems, policy development, and implementation. To date, this interaction has been particularly strong with non-governmental organizations, business, and local communities. In addition, initiatives to increase the participation of women and youth are common.

89. Action on gender issues is high in all regions. In many countries, national women's bureaux have been established, and representatives of women's groups are included on national sustainable development bodies. Wage rate differences and under-representation in key areas remain problems in most countries, however. Several countries have established national youth bodies or held youth forums to improve consultation and programme delivery. Typical programmes focus on leadership training, employment, including the promotion of youth entrepreneurship, environmental education, and community participation. Youth are often involved in environmental conservation and recycling projects. Self-determination and the empowerment of indigenous people are furthered in some countries through special agencies, and progress is being made with consultation, self-government, and access to natural resources and markets.

90. Non-governmental organizations play a significant role in raising awareness and mobilizing people at local, national, and international levels. Their interaction with government is regarded as helpful, and they are frequently included as members of national sustainable development bodies and international delegations. Agencies of many Governments have established partnerships with non-governmental organizations to implement sustainability projects. In all regions, countries are encouraging sustainable development at the community level by strengthening the role of local government in environmental, natural resource, and infrastructure planning and development. Communities in countries as diverse as China, Germany, India, Mexico, Poland, South Africa and Uruguay are developing local Agenda 21 initiatives. In Finland, for example, 88 communities covering half the national population are producing local versions of Agenda 21.

91. Several countries have established tripartite dialogue among unions, Governments, and industry to discuss the workplace environment, training, social services, and environmental protection. Frequently, unions and their workers contribute to sustainable development by participating in advisory councils and being active on workplace health and safety committees. The private sector is broadening its perspective so as to incorporate sustainable development. Business representatives are frequently included on national sustainable development bodies. Environmental industries and their associations are growing, due to the emphasis on material efficiency, waste reduction, and recycling. Some sectors, notably the chemical industry, have established voluntary programmes to assess and improve their environmental performance. Individual firms, especially in Europe and North America, have adopted

sustainable development management tools, such as life-cycle analysis and environmental audits.

92. In many countries, farmers' associations are well placed to influence sustainable development at local and national levels. Both government and farmers' groups cooperate to encourage the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices. The full integration of science in sustainable development decision-making is only evident in developed countries. Here, scientists participate in national policy development; sustainability principles are incorporated into science policy; and efforts are made to communicate science to the broader community. In developing countries, the link between science and decision-making is less comprehensive. However, individual countries have established programmes to disseminate scientific knowledge and are preparing national science and technology strategies.

H. Means of implementation

93. Adequate means of implementation are central to the successful implementation of Agenda 21. Partnerships, collaboration, holistic thinking, and cross-sectoral linkages will be essential if the socio-economic and environmental challenges are to be met. Currently, the mechanisms are insufficient for a rapid change to sustainable paths, especially in developing countries. The increasing inequity between wealthy nations and the least developed countries is particularly disturbing.

94. Financial resources are scarce, and technology transfer has yet to bring widespread benefits. General awareness has been raised, but technical and institutional capacity and access to sound information remain at sub-optimal levels. Considerable progress has been made with international institutional arrangements and legal instruments, but in many cases countries face implementation difficulties.

1. Financing sustainable development

95. Governments have responded to Agenda 21 by increasing funding for economic reform and social and environmental priorities. New sustainable development assistance funds have materialized in the 1990s but are not sufficient to meet the requirements of Agenda 21 in most countries. Assistance from developed countries may have increased, but most are failing to meet commitments made at UNCED. Both developed and developing countries call for renewed efforts to identify and pursue alternatives to traditional financial mechanisms.

96. For African countries, it is a struggle to find the financial resources to put sustainable development into practice, making external funding critical. Budget priorities are tied to poverty reduction, including basic health care and education. In Asia and the Pacific, many countries report an improved fiscal situation, with lower deficits, while others remain under severe economic constraints. Countries are using economic instruments and natural resource accounts to increase revenues and establish fair prices. These additional revenues are frequently used to establish special environmental funds. More

action still needs to be taken to lessen the adverse impacts of environmentally unfriendly subsidies.

97. Most Latin American and Caribbean countries have received new external funding since UNCED. However, countries are frustrated over the scarcity of funds for project implementation. Several have adopted new economic instruments and have eliminated unsound subsidies. Others have benefited from "debt for nature" swaps. The developed countries of Europe and North America focus primarily on development assistance and the introduction of new economic instruments. Many countries have increased development assistance, especially for multilateral purposes, particularly in the fields of human resource development, good governance, natural resource management, and environmental protection. Numerous countries have participated in debt relief schemes. However, few countries have met official development assistance (ODA) targets set at UNCED. Internally, countries are increasingly using various taxes and incentives more fully to reflect environmental costs but are only at an early phase in the study of environmentally unsound subsidies.

98. Budgets for environmental protection generally increased in countries with economies in transition, especially at the beginning of the transition period. Revenues from fees and permits are used to replenish environmental funds. Environmental expenditures are primarily allocated to water and air pollution control and waste management. Legal liability for past environmental damage is a difficult issue, discouraging new investment. A few countries have benefited from "debt for nature" swaps.

2. Transferring technology

99. In developed countries, there is increased emphasis on the development and use of environmentally sound technology, including efforts to transfer the technology to developing countries and those with economies in transition. Despite this, developing countries express strong dissatisfaction over access to this technology.

100. In Africa, most countries are not benefiting extensively from technology transfer. National centres for technology have been established in four of the reporting African countries, and several are in the process of assessing technology requirements. Technology transfer is occurring in Asia and the Pacific through bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Various mechanisms are used to encourage the adoption of efficient and clean technologies, including fiscal incentives, institutional development, training, and partnerships. Developing countries in all regions feel, however, that access to information on environmentally sound technologies (especially on sources and assessments) needs to be strengthened. Similarly, countries are concerned over the high cost of acquiring technology.

101. In Latin America and the Caribbean, collaboration on training, and information and experience-sharing is widespread. The introduction of new technology is apparent in the oil industry and for chloroflurocarbon substitution. Most of the developed countries of Europe and North America have established environmentally sound technology centres. Governments are forming

partnerships with the private sector to encourage the use of technology in both domestic and foreign markets. Most development assistance programmes emphasize capacity-building to facilitate technology transfer.

102. Various elements conducive to modernizing technology are being implemented in individual countries with economies in transition, including the use of international standards, training, and credits for clean technology. Human and institutional capacity generally exists, but there is a need for investment in efficient and clean technologies, especially related to energy, water, and industrial waste.

3. Capacity-building, education, and science

(a) Capacity-building

103. National mechanisms and international cooperation that mobilize human, financial, and technical resources are important for maximizing sustainable development opportunities. Capacity-building support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and other international and national institutions has benefited developing countries since UNCED. This is primarily in areas related to policy and strategy development, information enhancement, and participation. However, an additional capacity-building response is required in science, technology, and management in order to enable countries to implement sustainable development programmes and projects.

104. Reporting on capacity occurs throughout all chapters of Agenda 21. The primary message is simple: lack of institutional and human resource capacity represents a major constraint to the successful implementation of Agenda 21. This is particularly true in - but certainly not unique to - Africa.

(b) Education, public awareness, and training

105. Governments recognize the fundamental contribution education makes in increasing people's capacity to address sustainable development priorities, such as poverty reduction and health care. Often education for sustainable development or environmental education is incorporated as a key element in national strategies and in curricula. Considerable progress has been made in all reporting countries in raising public awareness and in incorporating a sustainable development perspective in primary education. This has been a result not only of governmental policy but also of major contributions from non-governmental organizations and other major groups. In all regions, training, particularly for teachers and officials, and science education represent priorities for the immediate future.

(c) Science

106. Science provides better knowledge and technology for sustainable development. In many of the reporting countries, scientists have also been actively involved in helping to develop integrative strategies. In order to fulfil these functions, it is essential to enhance scientific understanding, improve long-term scientific assessments, strengthen capacities, and ensure that

science is responsive to emerging needs. This is difficult in the climate of the science budget cuts being made by both developing and developed countries. As a consequence, the pool of trained scientists is eroding in many countries, particularly in Africa and Asia.

4. Information for decision-making

107. There has been considerable progress in this area since UNCED, particularly in the development and use of indicators and in the electronic access to information. Geographic information systems (GIS) are more widespread; however data gaps, data standards, and time series weaknesses persist at the national level, while data harmonization remains a critical challenge. Interpretation and assessment of data to provide quality information for decision-making has progressed but requires further development. Access to adequate and affordable telecommunications systems remains a priority need for developing countries.

108. In Africa, constraints to improving data and information limit progress. Most countries face difficulty accessing data due to inadequate and costly telecommunications infrastructure, lack of electronic capability, and insufficient trained staff. Available information is usually rated "good but with many gaps" for the vast majority of areas. "Poor" information is common in four areas - poverty, biotechnology, solid wastes, and radioactive wastes. A few countries have made significant advances, for example, in developing information systems based on GIS and remotely sensed data to assist decision-making and in establishing national information centres. In addition, several countries are starting to improve information by developing priority indicators.

109. Overall, in the majority of Asia and Pacific countries, data available is assessed as either "good" or "good but with many gaps" for all Agenda 21 themes. A few countries are starting to make use of database inventories and networks, remote-sensing and GIS, natural resource accounts, and information centres for information dissemination. The developed countries of the region use a range of information tools, such as indicators, state of the environment assessments, and resource valuation methods. There is considerable interest in improving information in Latin America and the Caribbean through data inventories, indicator development, and environmental information systems. Computer facilities are adequate in several countries. For about two thirds of the Agenda 21 themes, data are generally rated as "good but with many gaps". In other areas, such as integrated decision-making, desertification, waste, environmentally sound technology, and international institutional arrangements, the data tend to be "poor".

110. In the developed countries of Europe and North America, the availability of data and information tends to be "good" to "very good", facilitating regular dissemination in the form of statistical compendia, indicators, green accounts, and state of the environment reports. This capability is supported by electronic information systems and networks. A few countries, however, note difficulties with data standardization. Most countries are in the process of developing indicators. The countries with economies in transition are trying to move towards integrated monitoring and information systems. Available data are

rated mostly "good" or "good but with many gaps", but for biotechnology and environmentally sound technology, data appear to be weak.

5. International institutional arrangements and legal instruments

111. Information on country-by-country ratification of key international instruments related to the implementation of Agenda 21 is available in "Assessment of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level: summary tables and graphs" (Background paper No. 7).

II. CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES AHEAD

112. The Agenda 21 action plan provides the framework for putting sustainable development beyond a conceptual paradigm into the mainstream of decision-making. During the first five-year period since UNCED, there have been signs of progress, but - not unexpectedly - countries have a considerable distance to go before sustainability is achieved. This first period has emphasized the establishment of structures and processes to guide the implementation of sustainable development and put critical issues on national agendas. It is still too early to see widespread quantitative results.

113. Governments have risen to the challenge of sustainable development by establishing national and regional strategies that define problems and priorities, determine budget requirements, and outline implementation programmes. While few countries have produced fully integrated national strategies, there is widespread evidence of a broader perspective which considers the interrelationships between social, economic, and environmental factors. In concert with this activity, nations have endorsed the principle of wide participation in sustainable development decision-making. In general, major groups have increased their effective involvement, which ranges from participation in international conferences to being the key force behind many sustainability projects. They have been particularly effective at the local community level. As a consequence, overall awareness of sustainable development issues has increased in all regions.

114. Within the sectoral themes of Agenda 21, Governments have been focusing on major sustainable development priorities, such as poverty, consumption, biodiversity, and desertification. Nevertheless, widespread national progress in terms of results is more difficult to find. Poverty remains significant, and pervasive, and is increasing. Gains have been made to slow population growth rates, but many countries still face rates that they consider to be unsustainable. Improvements in linking health and the environment are widespread, but major health care inequities remain between developed and developing countries. Aspects of sustainable development are being reflected in school curricula, but greater support for basic education and training in the least developed countries is urgently required.

115. The financial resources required by developing countries, particularly the least developed countries, are still far from adequate and short of the targets

established by Agenda 21. Some assistance has been made available for planning and strategy development, but for programme and project implementation, available resources are far below requirements. Economic instruments are being introduced to improve efficiency and pricing, but the uncoupling of economic growth from energy use remains a distant prospect for most countries. Consequently, the global community has still not effectively addressed the issue of global warming. In transport, fuel efficiencies have been achieved, but they are far outweighed by the growth in the number of vehicles, resulting in severe health and congestion problems in most urban settlements.

116. The consideration of the environment within development has been reinforced since UNCED. Major conventions have been ratified, the amount of protected area has increased, and integrative decision-making tools, such as environmental impact assessment, have been widely adopted. Despite this increased attention, the magnitude of the major environmental issues has probably increased over the past five years. Biodiversity and forest cover continue to decline; commercial fish stocks are under increasing pressure; waste and pollution remain major threats; and land degradation continues to erode productive capacity.

117. Building on the strategic and participatory frameworks that are now in place, the primary challenge for the immediate future lies in moving from the policy development phase to implementation. This will not be easy, but is essential if the momentum already created is to bring concrete results. During the next five-year period, it will be necessary to continue to evaluate progress towards sustainable development.

III. NEXT STEPS

118. The country profiles have contributed to two separate and important processes. The first has resulted in this report - that is, the outward-looking reporting process, which permits countries to establish baseline data, monitor their own progress, provide transparency and share experiences and information with others, and indicate areas of priority, progress and constraint.

119. The second is the internal, inward-looking process that brings together an array of stakeholders at the national level to review their progress, interact, and work towards a common assessment and common purpose. In some cases, the preparation of country profiles has initiated or furthered national strategies for sustainable development; in others, it has strengthened national strategies; and in others, it has spurred the effort to collect, organize and coordinate the collection of information.

120. To strengthen these processes, it is recommended that

(a) National reporting to the Commission continue, without prejudice to the Commission's future agenda;

(b) Rather than preparing new comprehensive reports on an annual basis, countries be requested to update the country profiles on an annual basis, as appropriate;

(c) Countries that have not yet done so prepare a comprehensive country profile; and

(d) Consistent with the proposals for streamlining national reporting requirements (see E/CN.17/1997/6), countries need to report separately to the Commission only on those issues on which they do not have to report to conferences of parties of international conventions and other intergovernmental bodies.

Notes

[1] Approximately half of them were final country profiles submitted by national Governments in time to be reflected in this report. The other half were draft country profiles, compiled by the Secretariat on the basis of reports provided by Governments to the Commission in 1994, 1995 and 1996 and awaiting finalization by the respective Governments.

[2] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.II.C.1.

[3] Readers are encouraged to refer to two companion background documents which will be made available to the Commission at its fifth session and which provide much fuller country-by-country and, in some cases, sector-by-sector information. They are "Assessment of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level: summary tables and graphs" (Background paper No. 7) and "Assessment of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level: table of key coordination mechanisms and actions" (Background paper No. 8). In addition, the "List of official sustainable development contacts" (Background paper No. 9) provides a reference for obtaining further information. It should be noted that, because the background documents will be completed only immediately before the commencement of the fifth session of the Commission, there are likely to be some countries included in them which have not been represented in the present report.

[4] ... in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa. See A/50/218.